

9 NOV 1969

White House Innocent

By Gary Arnold

"The Virgin President," currently playing at the Capitol Hill — and being advertised in this paper and others as "The President" presumably to protect public morals while serving to inspire public risibility — is a pitifully incompetent political satire about an innocent chief executive and his corrupt advisors. Together, innocence and corruption combine to ruin the country not for just a term, a decade or a generation, but once and for all.

The film was slapped together last year by several alumni of The Second City. The major share of blame probably belongs to Severn Darden, who devised the story and has overestimated his talent to the tune of four roles, including the central one of the virgin-whatshisname. Far from picking up where Alec Guinness and Peter Sellers left off, Darden wears out his welcome in record time: each new disguise seems more inept than the last.

Years ago Fernandel had one of his best roles as a young village lout who is chosen the queen of an annual religious festival because all the girls in town seem to have lost the principal qualification—virginity. Subsequently, the innocent male went to Paris and found out what the girls knew.

"The Virgin President" is framed as a documentary about the decline and fall of America. It seems that during some semi-monarchical future, the old President died and was succeeded by his son, a 35-year-old innocent. Once in power, the new President is used in a variety of farcical ways by his scheming Cabinet officials. One of the major schemes involves an attempt to marry him off to the daughter of the Chinese Prime Minister. By the time the innocent has been educated in the ways of the world, doomsday is upon us.

The concept isn't unpromising, but it's hopelessly roughly bungled. Stylistically, "The Virgin President" represents the antithesis

"THE VIRGIN PRESIDENT." Produced by Severn Darden, Graeme Ferguson and Jim Hubbard. Directed and photographed by Ferguson. Story by Darden and Ferguson. Music by Teiji Ito. Released by New Line Cinema. 71 minutes. No rating.

THE CAST

Fillard Millmore	Severn Darden
Schuyler Colfax	Richard Neuweiler
William Salvo	Andrew Duncan
Jack Steel	Louis Waldon
Ruth Muggababy	Richard Schickel
Rutherford Melon	Paul Benedict
Mom Millmore	Sadie Bond
Von Clauswitz	Anthony Holland
Chinese Prime Minister	Conrad Yama
Prime Minister's Daughter	L'Inelle Hamanaka
President's Girl Friend	Sabrina Scharf
General Heath	Peter Boyle
White House Critic	Ch'lie B'ngartner

sis of "A Session with The Committee." Instead of seeing the achieved, end results of improvisational comedy, we see the humble beginnings—characters and situations that remain to be thought out and developed and rehearsed and then tested out on an audience in order to gauge the effectiveness and make the necessary adjustments.

The improvisation here is just so much preliminary hacking around. The actors, who don't know what to expect or where they're going, keep getting in each other's way, making a shambles of the other guy's specialty. Darden, the most important member of the troupe, seems to have the worst brainstormers and the worst sense of timing.

It's amazing to learn that the film was cut to 71 minutes from better than 20 hours of exposed footage. Are we supposed to conclude that director Graeme Ferguson didn't know which scenes were the funny ones or that there were no funny scenes?

A bit of disinterested criticism from outsiders might have spared everyone a lot of grief. The filmmakers no doubt consider their material timely because they've thrown a few haymakers at American politics and predicted a nuclear holocaust (with details borrowed from "Fall-Safe"). Unfortunately, neither the people nor the milieu are timely enough. The best performer in the film is Andrew Duncan as the Secretary of Defense, — his eyes and the corners of his mouth remind us of Secretary Laird.

As for the film, it could bail the film out, even if the jokes were just as bumptious and the direction just as disorganized. As it is, "The Virgin President" dies from a want of specific references and caricatures.

The film probably needs all the gratuitous publicity it can get, including the censorship of titles and ad copy by family newspapers. One of the movie's obvious limitations is that it doesn't begin to rival the real thing. Now that Vice-President Agnew is busy restoring and expanding the image of his office that first delighted the nation when Victor Moore did it in "Of Thee I Sing," political satirists who ignore specific targets are simply being foolish.

It's likely that if this movie were being made today, the concept of the President and the Presidential succession would have to be changed to accommodate Agnew's personality. And in every conceivable way—art, humor, box office—it would be a change for the better.

P. Arnold, Gary
Lorus, Waldon

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